
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Property Address:	Florida Avenue at 9th and 8th, NW	X	Agenda
Landmark/District:	U Street Historic District		Consent Calendar
		X	Concept Review
Meeting Date:	March 22, 2012		Alteration
H.P.A. Number:	12-159	X	New Construction
Staff Reviewer:	Steve Callcott		Demolition
		X	Subdivision

Florida Avenue Residential LLC (JBG Companies), represented by the Miller/Hull Partnership architects, seeks conceptual design review for construction of two residential and retail buildings in the U Street Historic District. The sites are located on Square 393, with frontage on Florida Avenue, 9th Street and 8th Street (henceforth referred to as the “west site” or “west building”) and Square 416, with frontage on Florida Avenue and 8th Street (“east site” or “east building”). The project would also include subdivision to combine lots.

Property History and Description

The sites are largely vacant, having been assembled and cleared by the 1970s when they were obtained by WMATA to serve as a staging area for construction of the Metro green line. The only extant structures (and which was not part of the WMATA property) are on the west parcel – a pair of two-story buildings at 1933-35 9th Street dating from the second half of the 19th century with one-story projecting storefronts flanking a central door to the upper floor, a stucco façade, and wood trim around the windows and at the cornice. Based on research undertaken by the applicants, the façade and storefronts likely date from 1923, when the buildings were combined into a single structure. The building has an overall width of approximately 33 feet and a depth of approximately 95 feet. Of the 95 feet of depth, approximately 30 feet comprises the original nineteenth century structure; the balance was added through subsequent additions and renovations. The building is listed as contributing to the historic district in the National Register nomination.

Planning Considerations

Redevelopment of this site has the potential for fulfilling an important city goal in contributing to the revitalization of the U Street corridor as a city-wide cultural and entertainment destination. In 2003-2004, the Office of Planning, working with other partner agencies, private landowners and the community, developed the Uptown Destination District Plan, dubbed “DUKE” after Duke Ellington, as a development framework plan to guide redevelopment of the U and 7th Streets corridors as an 18-hour arts, entertainment and cultural district. Promoting and reinforcing the historic character and African-American heritage of the area is a cornerstone of the plan, while it also recognizes the need for additional density and transit-oriented development to achieve the

critical mass and desired vibrancy for the area. DUKE provides a series of recommendations for promoting high quality new design in coordination with the preservation of existing structures, encouraging additional “destination venues” that could enliven the area, promoting the area’s history to encourage heritage tourism, enhancing the neighborhood’s retail base, providing affordable housing, and addressing transportation and parking needs.

As a policy document rather than an implementation plan, DUKE did not result in rezoning or new programs for the area, but rather outlines how many of the plan’s goals could be achieved through public-private coordination and existing tools and incentives, such as the HPRB design review process. The plan was adopted by the DC Council in June 2005.

The DUKE plan identified these particular parcels as a major gap in the neighborhood that cut off the redeveloping area around the Howard Theater, White Cross Bakery, and Shaw/Howard University Metro from the more fully redeveloped area to the west around the U Street Metro station. The most important recommendation of the plan as it pertains to this site is that the project be designed and programmed to activate and bridge that gap.

In order for the Board to give “due consideration to the [city’s] zoning laws and regulations” as stipulated under the preservation law for projects involving new construction, it should be aware that the existing zoning on this site is C-2-B, allowing a maximum height of 65 feet. The site is also located in the Uptown Arts Overlay District and subject to the city’s Inclusionary Zoning (IZ) regulations, which permits some additional height and density – a maximum of 70 feet and 5.0 FAR – to encourage affordable housing, retail and arts uses. The area is identified in the Comprehensive Plan as Moderate Density Residential/Moderate Density Commercial.

Proposal

The project calls for relocating the original main block of 1933-35 9th Street from the center of the 9th Street frontage approximately 50 feet to the southern end of the site, adjacent to a row of two- and three-story historic commercial buildings, where it would be restored for retail use. The north-south alley on the west site would be rerouted to exit on 9th Street (rather than on Florida Avenue), just north of the relocated historic building.

Each of the two new buildings would be organized with a central bar running parallel to Florida Avenue and a secondary wing extending south on 8th Street. The residential entrances would be located across from each other on 8th Street. The buildings would have tall (17’6”) ground-level retail spaces, five stories of residential units, and one floor of below-grade parking, achieving a height of 70 feet.

The design of the primary Florida Avenue bar of each building would consist of a slightly recessed first floor to provide greater width to the narrow sidewalk on these blocks, and full-height glass storefronts with an undulating plan. The upper floors would project to the property line, with a slight overhang above the retail bases. The buildings would

include large-scale projections and insets to modulate the massing. The facades would be composed of a concrete frame in-filled with full-height windows and metal panels of varying sizes. The designs of the two primary bars are intended to be differentiated but complementary to each other.

The residential building entrances would be recessed from the street, accessed by monumental stairs (visible from the street through a glass curtain wall) opening to mid-block courtyards. The secondary bars of the buildings extending south on 9th and 8th Street would step down in size, with lower-scaled storefronts, projections that terminate at the fourth floor, and step downs in height as the building abuts smaller scale historic buildings.

Evaluation

Building relocation

Relocating an historic building from its original site is not standard preservation practice and is generally discouraged by Federal preservation standards and guidelines. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties cites "removing or relocating historic buildings or landscapes features" as a treatment that is "not recommended" and the National Register bulletin "How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Designation" cautions that moving a building may compromise a building's relationship to its site and surroundings.

The issue has only rarely been posed to the Board. In 2009, the Board did not support proposed relocation of a two-story frame house in Cleveland Park (3211 Wisconsin Avenue, NW); among the reasons cited was that the new location and context were found to be inappropriate for the building. However, in limited instances, the Board has approved relocation as an appropriate treatment. In 2006, a proposal to relocate three bungalows in the Takoma Park Historic District (6924 and 6926 Willow Street, and 6949 Maple Street, NW) was approved after the Board concluded that they were "isolated and visually unconnected to the historic district," were not individually significant, and did not gain particular significance from their location on their particular lots. The Board concluded that in their new locations, on the same block and adjacent to other similar properties, the buildings would contribute more fully than if left in their historic location.

In this particular instance, and for some of the same reasons as the Board cited in the Takoma Park project, HPO recommends support for relocation of 1933-35 9th Street as a compatible solution. The building currently occupies a central location in a large vacant site which offers few satisfying options for incorporating it into the project without it being overwhelmed or further severed from the row of similar historic commercial buildings. Relocation will retain the building on the same square and street within the historic district, and provide a more appropriate contextual setting adjacent to similarly scaled historic buildings. In this instance, relocation will facilitate both a better preservation and design solution, allowing more open space and separation between the existing building and the new construction, and a more compatible context for the historic building.

New construction

The applicants have spent several months refining the design in coordination with the community and HPO. As the site is located at the edge of the historic district, comprised largely of vacant land, and without a particularly strong sense of historic context immediately surrounding it, HPO has not discouraged the applicant's bolder, more abstract and less specifically referential approach to the design but instead has worked with the applicants to define the most important design principles for the project, and to apply those to the evolving design. These design principles have included:

- 1) Breaking the mass of the buildings down into component parts, with the primary weight and mass expressed on Florida Avenue, and secondary masses that step down in size, height and scale as the buildings abut the smaller historic buildings to the south;
- 2) Scaling the components of the buildings -- storefronts, fenestration, projections -- so that they coexist harmoniously with the historic buildings in the district;
- 3) Incorporating sufficient variety in massing, façade organization, fenestration, and materials so that buildings relate to the smaller-scaled, organic character of the historic district, while still allowing an honest expression of the new construction as a single development effort;
- 4) Using materials and colors that relate to the predominately warm masonry and wood tones found in the historic district;
- 5) Encouraging the project to respond to the Uptown Arts District and DUKE plan, which encourage concentrating retail and eliminating alley access on Florida Avenue to create a more vibrant pedestrian street, locating residential entrances on 8th Street, and encouraging the creation of high quality contemporary design.

While still preliminary, the applicants and HPO seek the Board's comments and guidance as to whether these are the appropriate principles, and how successful the concept design is in achieving them. Most specifically, the applicants are seeking assurance that the overall site plan, the proposal to relocate 1933-35 9th Street on the site, and the proposed height and massing, and the general architectural direction -- subject to further development and material selection -- are consistent with the character of the historic district prior to further design development.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Review Board find the following aspects of the concept to be compatible with the character of the historic district and consistent with the purposes of the preservation act:

- 1) Relocation of the front, original section of 1933-35 9th Street to the southern portion of the site, adjacent to the row of similarly-sized and scaled historic buildings, and removal of the later rear additions;
- 2) Reconfiguration of the alley on the western parcel to exit on 9th Street;
- 3) Subdivision to allow lot combination on both the west and east sites;

- 4) Overall site organization of the new construction;
- 5) The proposed height and massing;
- 6) The general architectural direction, subject to further development and material selection.

The HPO recommends that the applicants continue working on the designs, materials and articulation of the proposal and return for further review when appropriate.